



# **Large Jail Network Bulletin**



# Selecting High Level Corrections Staff

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**F**his article explores one process for selecting high-level corrections staff. I also discuss here our obligation, as corrections managers, to train the next generation of executives.

## Identifying the Most Qualified Candidates

The hiring process described here is designed to identify the most qualified candidates among those applying from both inside and outside the organization. This process is used in the Broward Sheriff's Office (BSO) for selecting high-level personnel in all areas of operations. The skills and traits measured by this method are leadership, the abilities to organize and plan, perception and analysis, judgment and decision-making, interpersonal skills, oral communications, and written communications.

One advantage of the selection process is that it has credibility among existing staff, as they have either personally gone through it or have seen its results. Community leaders are also invited to participate in the hiring procedure, which ensures that their concerns are

addressed and that they are confident of its objectivity.

The process seeks to document and measure the specific skills, knowledge, and abilities (SKA) desired in someone who is an executive-level position. Although identifying the SKAs would seem an obvious first step in the process, it is frequently not done well.

## Measuring "Leadership"

High-level administrators are sought for their talent at organizational and human resource management—not in terms of how well they know the agency's operational procedures. Substantive knowledge about the intricacies of the local criminal justice system is also unnecessary. Developing exercises to objectively measure those skills that are actually at a premium takes thoughtful work.

For example, what is an objective measure of "leadership" that can be included in a hiring process? Oral communications, written communications, and general knowledge about the corrections systems are much easier to document and to rate. The dimensions that are difficult to rate

are those which often make or break the administrator: management ability, judgment, fairness, ability to set priorities, skill in managing the external environment, the ability to

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handle multiple crises, and interpersonal ability. Selecting administrators is also often made difficult by current or past employers' reluctance to give honest assessments of candidates.

## Broward County's Selection Process

The typical selection process for high-level staff at BSO takes one day. All candidates begin early in the day with a brief orientation to the department and the position, and then timed, written exercises begin. These written exercises are designed to measure more than just specific corrections knowledge; they are structured to require integration of information, data, processes, and creativity. Grammar, spelling, and sentence structure are also graded.

After a morning of testing, the candidates are told which of their written responses to prepare for a videotaped response and then are given time to prepare the presentation. The length of the video response depends on the position, with higher-level positions generally doing longer video presentations of up to twenty minutes. Following this exercise, the candidates are given a more traditional interview in front of a panel.

Scores for each element, which have been graded separately, are compiled to identify the top candidates. Throughout the day, human resources staff are available to answer any of the candidates' questions not directly related to the specifics of the job—such as information on the benefit package.

Simulation of job-relevant activities is one way to gather considerable information about candidates. BSO's practice of requiring candidates to respond via video with no audience also provides a clear documentation of skills. I can tell you from first-

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hand experience that this is a stressful experience for candidates, requiring them to organize their thoughts, time their responses, and impart their comments in a poised and authoritative manner. Simulations can be also be created, using

role players who have been carefully schooled in how to ask questions and when to follow candidates' responses with additional questions.

### **The Importance of Selecting the Best Correctional Administrators**

Our colleagues in the largest law enforcement agencies have for at least the last decade worked to perfect the selection of new police chiefs. Police chiefs are much more "public" appointments than their corrections peers, and selecting the "wrong" chief has potentially damaging results for those in political power. Selecting a police chief is often seen by the public as encompassing more than the selection of an individual. It constitutes the endorsement of a particular philosophy, a response to community concerns, or a need to rebuild after a crisis. The same level of public interest is often missing when corrections executives are selected, although the consequences of a poor selection are at least as important.

**The job simulation for police chiefs may take the form of the chief candidates responding to a hostile "public" after**

police have been involved in a shooting incident in a minority community. This type of simulation can quickly reveal the extent to which the candidate has the needed interpersonal abilities and crisis management skills. Most of us can

easily think of similar situations relevant to corrections that might be included in a hiring process for corrections executives.

Structuring this type of selection process requires the assistance of human resource professionals who can translate what the agency administrator wants into a valid selection process. Too often those of us who are unskilled in developing rating scales, in training assessors, and in creating the questions downplay the importance of this activity. Most agency administrators are familiar with the subtleties of the hiring process, but most of us are too impatient to let it develop.

**T**he "how-to-do" of the hiring process is actually less important than deciding what we need to measure. I believe that too often our hiring processes for executive level staff are not focused on identifying leaders and managers, but instead reward people who have simply survived in the environment longer than others. Selecting executive-level staff can potentially become a very divisive issue when an agency seeks to fill high-ranking positions from outside the organization.

This brings me to my final point: the importance of grooming current staff for management-level positions.

## Raising Our Own Managers

Most of us who are jail administrators and executives didn't begin our careers thinking we would long remain in the jail business; the consequence is that our ambivalence has contributed to a current shortage of executives willing and able to assume leadership roles.

Corrections agencies are notoriously poor at raising their own future managers and executives. Because of budget constraints, few agencies provide high-quality training for first-line supervisors and mid-managers. Nor do they accurately assess the current management skills of their staff in order to build training and mentoring programs that will yield the next generation of managers. In comparison to our colleagues in law enforcement, we have not invested time in the promotional assessment process-for either sworn staff or civilian staff-to promote the most-qualified individuals who have demonstrated the skills and ability needed to assume the next level of management responsibilities.

I believe that we must find the resources to develop executive talent in our own agencies. It is a morale blow to agency staff when the agency has to go outside its own organization to hire managers-especially top managers. On the other hand, it is deadly to an organization to promote from within staff who do not have the skills to be executives.

This dilemma is not easy or cheap to solve. The commitment to total staff development

**requires more than annual in-service training. It requires the agency's funding sources to buy in to the need to "build"**

managers and thus ultimately improve the efficiency and effectiveness of operations.

**O**ne way to encourage broader views is to encourage mid-managers to explore and expand their professional opportunities through networking, attending conferences, and participating in educational management opportunities-including those outside the corrections realm. How often do we attend ACA or AJA conferences only to run into the same people year after year, with the same individuals presenting workshops?

In Broward County, we are experimenting with putting twenty corrections mid-managers through a modified program of Total Quality Management (TQM). These individuals, both sworn and civilian staff, volunteered to participate in this sixty-hour program over a three-month period to help themselves "move into the 21st century" (our creative slogan to attract interest).

This foray into some very untraditional corrections management

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approaches has genuinely opened some minds.

## What's Needed

How can we raise better managers? Certainly formal training and educational experiences are one part of the answer. Our law enforcement colleagues have for many years relied on the FBI's National Academy as a training ground for the profession's future leaders. The National Academy's impact has lessened over the years as many law enforcement officers have received college degrees before entering their careers. We should focus on creating a national initiative, with funds far beyond those currently available to the NIC Academy, to build similar expectations among corrections officials.

We should insist that community colleges, colleges, and universities with correctional administration programs become more visible, available, and as high in quality as law enforcement management programs.' I recently challenged a professor in the local state university's criminal justice program to develop a specialty field in corrections at the

master's degree level. Giving me a perplexed look, he said that would probably be difficult since five core courses would be required to have a corrections specialty, and he couldn't think what five courses that might be. Such lack of enlightenment among criminal justice academicians is disheartening. We must demand better.

Consider for a moment the example I provided recently to a reporter who called for information on the Broward Sheriffs Office's approach to executive recruiting.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1995, we initiated a recruitment process for the executive staff of a 1,000+ bed new generation jail in Broward County. We knew that our pool of available managers, while willing, had never worked in a direct supervision facility or been part of a transition team. We advertised in all the corrections magazines, sent the recruitment notice to colleagues across the country, and placed notices on the tables available at the ACA Winter Conference. The salary was competitive, with the added lure of the South Florida environment, and an agency recently ACA-accredited.

The result of our three to four months of recruiting at no small monetary cost? We received approximately fifty applications, screened to six who seemed highly qualified. Four of these individuals were interested enough to make the trip to South Florida for the interviews.

I contrast this experience with that of a small local police agency in Broward County, with fewer than twenty-five officers, that was recruiting for a police chief at the same time. That agency received almost 200 applications.

This difference may be interpreted in many different ways. To my mind, however, it points to the fact that there are not many managers available for top-level corrections positions. We need to develop a level of professionalism that will insist that the selection processes be structured, as well as less traditional. We should seek to identify the real leaders and challenge the candidates. We have a larger responsibility, however, to begin to take actions to find and develop the managers for tomorrow.

Unfortunately, state and local corrections is the growth industry as we move into the next century. This fact is sad enough without the prospect of having such incredible resources—both human and fiscal—poorly managed. Selection should be the easy part. It would be wonderful if we simply had to work long hours to identify the “best” from a large field of highly qualified candidates. If we do our job right, that should be our legacy to the future.

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## Notes

1. Policing executives of the fifty largest agencies in the United States in 1978 created the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). PERF advances the agenda for large sized police agencies who believe that their unique needs and issues are often lost in memberships in the International Association of Chiefs of Police or the National Sheriffs' Association.

2. “Florida Sheriff's Office Says Extensive, Intense Interview Process Pays Off,” *The Corrections Professional*, Vol. 1, Issue 14, April 5, 1996. ■